

THANK GOD FOR THE CROSS

Luke 17:11-19

Thanksgiving

November 23, 2022

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The gospel lesson for Thanksgiving comes from *The Gospel According to Luke*, chapter 17, verses 11 through 19. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Luke 17, beginning at verse 11, we read in Jesus' name.

¹¹ On the way to Jerusalem he was passing along between Samaria and Galilee. ¹² And as he entered a village, he was met by ten lepers, who stood at a distance ¹³ and lifted up their voices, saying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us." ¹⁴ When he saw them he said to them, "**Go and show yourselves to the priests.**" And as they went they were cleansed. ¹⁵ Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice; ¹⁶ and he fell on his face at Jesus' feet, giving him thanks. Now he was a Samaritan. ¹⁷ Then Jesus answered, "**Were not ten cleansed? Where are the nine? ¹⁸ Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?"** ¹⁹ And he said to him, "**Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well.**"

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

If Jesus had not died on the cross, there would be no Thanksgiving turkey. There would be no stuffing, no lefse, no cranberry sauce, no mashed potatoes, and no pie. There would be no TV to watch the Vikings on and no car to get you over the river and through the woods to grandmother's house. We would have none of these wonderful things if Jesus had not died on the cross. Every good thing God gives to us, including Turkey and stuffing and everything else, is only because Jesus died on the cross.

You might think, *How do you figure that?* The crucifixion of Jesus is pretty big deal, but maybe we're giving it just a little bit too much credit. What does Jesus' death on the cross really have to do with Thanksgiving dinner, and all our possessions, and literally every other good thing in the world?

We generally think of the cross as being the source of *spiritual* blessings, especially the forgiveness of sins. But physical, even material blessings? Turkey, stuffing, and apple pie? Yes. Jesus died so we can eat apple pie. Now that might sound a bit trivial. *Thank you Jesus for dying on the cross so I can eat this delicious piece of pie.* If that's the *only* reason we thank Jesus for dying on the cross, we would be missing the point. But we would also be missing something if we don't recognize the cross as the true source of turkey, stuffing, pie, and every other good thing.

So how do we figure this?

First, we recognize that "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights" (James 1:17). Every good thing is from God. And there is no good thing without God. This, I think, is pretty simple to understand when we remember that God is the creator of all things. If God had not said, "Let the earth sprout vegetation" (Gen. 1:11), there would be no apples. And if he had not said, "Let the earth bring forth living creatures" (Gen. 1:24), there would be no cows to produce cream. And if God had not "formed the man of dust

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from the ground,” there would be no people to churn the cream into butter, or slice up the apples, or mix it with all the other ingredients and bake it in the oven. Everything that goes into the pie can be traced back to God’s act of creation. And, beyond this, God has continued to preserve all these things, right up to the present day. So we can trace the origin of every material thing back to the creation of the cosmos.

So first we recognize that every good thing comes from God. He gives us these things as an act of grace. But we also recognize that God is gracious to us only on account of Jesus’ death on the cross for us.

Let’s stay in Genesis for a moment. When God placed Adam in the garden, he gave him one prohibition. He said, “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die” (Gen. 2:16-17). Both Adam and his wife Eve knew this commandment. They knew that if they ate the fruit they would die. I don’t know if they completely understood what death meant, because nothing had ever died before, but they knew what God said.

So they knew what would happen, but they ate it anyway. Now the thing that might puzzle us is that Adam and Eve didn’t drop dead that day. Adam, at least, lived for another 930 years (Gen. 5:5).

But God said, “In the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.” So what gives? Did God change his mind? Was he just giving them an extreme consequence that he never actually intended to follow through with? God almost sounds like a dad in a minivan saying, “Don’t make me turn this car around.” Everyone knows that minivan isn’t turning around until after you spend Thanksgiving at grandma’s house. But dad really wants the kids to behave so he’s gotta try something. So he makes an empty threat.

But God doesn’t make empty threats. And we shouldn’t even think of death as God’s *threat* for sin. We should understand it to be a natural consequence or the just punishment for sin. But it’s not a threat, and it’s certainly not an empty threat.

So there are a couple things to understand about God’s commandment and what did or did not happen to Adam and Eve.

First, we should understand death not merely to be an event, but a process. Adam and Eve most certainly did begin to die that day. They were barred from the tree of life (Gen. 3:22-23), so their bodies began to decay. And the same thing is happening to each of us. We are all dying. Even on a microscopic level, every living cell is dying. Even when we are young and our cells are growing and multiplying, we are still dying at the same time. Every living cell has an expiration date. Every cell and every living thing is always in the process of dying. We try all sorts of things to stop it or slow it down, but it simply cannot be stopped. The entire creation was subjected to death. So every pain and every sort of suffering, whether it’s physical or mental or emotional or whatever, every sort of suffering is a symptom of death. We are dying all the time. So the first thing to understand about God’s commandment and the fate of Adam and Eve is that death is not a singular event, but a process.

And the second thing to understand is that God is merciful and gracious. Now let’s define those words: mercy and grace. Mercy is God not giving us what we deserve: sudden death. And grace is God giving us what we don’t deserve: forgiveness, life, and salvation.

So when we don’t immediately receive the punishment we deserve, that’s mercy. And when God gives us good things instead, that’s grace.

Adam and Eve may have deserved to drop dead that very day, but God is merciful. And God graciously allowed them to still enjoy the pleasures of creation while this process of death did its

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work. And the same thing happens to us. God mercifully allows us to live, and he graciously gives us gifts, both in this life and in eternity.

But the question is, *Why?* Why doesn't God give us the punishment we deserve? Why did he allow us to be born in the first place? And why does he give us gifts we don't deserve?

The answer to this question is, and always has been, *Jesus*. It is only on account of Jesus' sacrifice for us that we are permitted to even breathe one breath of air.

From the moment we are conceived, we are utterly corrupt. We are in bondage to sin. Born after the image of Adam, who had fallen into rebellion against God, we seek and desire the things that satisfy our own selves with no regard for the will of our Creator. This is the essence of sin, and we have this nature from the very moment we are conceived. For this reason we deserve to be conceived straight into the torment of hell. And God would be just to do so. But he doesn't, and this is mercy.

Now I recognize that might sound a little extreme, that we deserve to be conceived straight into the torment of hell. This isn't a conclusion we come by naturally. Part of the reason this sounds extreme is that we just don't experience it. We are permitted to live, and this is obviously very good. But the effect is that we wrongly assume that we must *deserve* to live. Whenever we get used to something, we come to think we deserve it, whether or not we actually do.

We also have a skewed perception of good. We judge humanity and we judge ourselves on a curve. Our go-to standard for morality is not God's perfect will, but other corrupt individuals. But this doesn't yield an accurate result. When corrupt people are compared to other corrupt people, about fifty percent of us come out as above average, and the other fifty percent come out as below average. But that doesn't amount to anything before God when we're all still corrupt. The only way to get an accurate result is from a standard that comes to us from outside of ourselves. And this is what God's Law does. It comes to us from God, and it reveals all of us to be sinful and deserving of death.

If we have broken one part of God's Law, we have broken all of it. We tend to think that as long as we do more good things than bad things, then we must be good people. But this is nonsense. God rightly expects his creatures to work the way we are supposed to.

Suppose you have a car where 51% of the components work the way they are supposed to. That's better than half, but that would be a really terrible car. If your fuel pump and three out of six sparkplugs work, it won't perform very well. And if your radiator works but half the coolant hoses have holes in them, you're going to have serious problems. Now imagine this is the case with all the systems in your car. 49% of all the parts are broken. The only thing to do with a car like that is take it to the junkyard. Even if 99% of the parts on your car work, that 1% would be enough to drive you crazy, but probably not anywhere else. It really only takes one broken part to make the entire car useless. A good car is one in which everything works the way it is supposed to. And the same is true for human beings. The only problem is, there aren't actually any human beings who do that. We all deserve a free tow to the junkyard.

Now, if we did have some perfect human beings living among us, this fact would be manifestly obvious to the rest of us. But we don't recognize this, and we have a hard time accepting it, simply because we don't have any perfect human beings to compare ourselves to. So we kind of scoff at the idea that we all deserved to be conceived straight into the torment of hell.

But this is biblical. Scripture is clear that we are conceived in sin (Ps. 51:5). And Scripture also teaches that the wages of sin is death (Rom. 6:23). From the very moment we are conceived, we are already in a sinful state that deserves death.

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But this is not what happens to us. And the only reason this doesn't happen to us is Jesus. God is merciful and gracious to us, but God is also just. He still punishes every sin. So his mercy and grace don't simply appear out of thin air. It isn't for no reason. God's mercy and grace are always on account of Jesus Christ. If we ever receive anything from God it is always because Jesus died on the cross.

In the gospel lesson we read tonight, one out of ten cleansed lepers returns to give Jesus thanks. He returned because he understood who Jesus is: God in human flesh. And he realized his cleansing was a gift from God. It wasn't something he deserved.

When we go through times of suffering, we sometimes consider God to be unjust. That's normal for us. We think him to be unfair for allowing us to suffer. So then if he relieves us of our suffering, we might not think that he's given us a great gift; he's simply given us what we deserved all along. When this happens, we might say, "Thank you," out of habit or politeness, but there isn't really a whole lot of gratitude behind it. But if we understand that we all deserve much worse than what we experience, then any removal of suffering is a gift of God's mercy. And every good thing is a gift of God's grace.

So when this cleansed leper realizes that Jesus is God in human flesh, and he has been cleansed from his leprosy, he doesn't come back to argue with Jesus about why he let him suffer in the first place. He comes back, falls on his face at Jesus' feet, and gives him thanks. He recognizes it as an act of mercy on Jesus' part.

And it was an act of mercy because of where Jesus was going. The opening words of the text are, "On the way to Jerusalem" (17:11). Earlier in *The Gospel of Luke*, Jesus had set his face to Jerusalem (9:51). And he was going there for one specific purpose: he was going there to die. He was going there to bear the sins of the world. It was because Jesus was going to Jerusalem to bear the sins of this Samaritan leper, that he gave him a little sample of the greater healing he would experience at the Resurrection of the Dead on the Last Day. The Samaritan leper was spared his suffering because Jesus was on the way to Jerusalem to bear his suffering. And the same thing is true for Adam and Eve, and for you and me, and for everyone in between. We are spared the suffering we deserve, and we are given what we do not deserve, all because Jesus bore our sins and suffered the wrath of God in our place. So Jesus received what we deserved, and we receive what Jesus deserves.

So when we sit down to give thanks to God, wherever that is and whoever we're with, give thanks for the blood of Jesus, which is the true source of turkey, stuffing, and apple pie. And if you're going to give thanks for these smaller things, give thanks for the bigger things too: the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body to eternal life, and everlasting salvation. God is merciful, and God is gracious, all because Jesus died. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.